

VZCZCXRO6317
PP RUEHLMC
DE RUEHLM #1369/01 2770837
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 040837Z OCT 07
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6921
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4055
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1427
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 4108
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 1208
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 0351
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3194
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8026
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION
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RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0644
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STATE FOR SCA/INS, USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2017

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER ASSESSES STABILITY OF
GOVERNMENT

REF: A. COLOMBO 1318

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1349

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr. for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In a lunch on October 3 with Ambassador, former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera said that his breakaway faction from the ruling SLFP party and the opposition UNP have not yet been able to persuade the JVP to vote against the Government in November, mostly because the JVP stands to lose half or more of the 37 seats it now holds in elections that could follow. He said former President Chandrika Kumaratunga still enjoys considerable influence and might be willing to assume leadership of the SLFP party, similar to the role Sonia Gandhi now plays in leading the Congress Party in India, if the opportunity presents itself. Samaraweera commended the public position the USG has taken on the conditions needed to stabilize the east. He also noted his plan to meet with Louise Arbour next week to express his support for an expanded presence of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights in Sri Lanka. End Summary.

Parliamentary Jockeying

[1](#)2. (C) Samaraweera opened by noting that he had just come from a press conference with Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe in which the two had discussed the political strategy of their alliance, The "National Congress" formed in July between the UNP and the SLFP/M, Samaraweera's breakaway faction from the ruling SLFP. Asked how he saw the runup to the potentially decisive budget debates in November, Samaraweera said it was not clear that the National Congress would have the support they need to defeat the government's budget in parliament in November. He indicated that with the support of the nationalist JVP and the Tamil National Alliance they would have 105 of the 113 votes they would need to obtain a majority. Asked what the President's options would be if he loses the budget vote, Samaraweera said that the President would either have to dissolve parliament or try to form a new cabinet that could command a majority and

submit a new revised budget within 90 days. If that budget also was defeated the President would be obliged to dissolve parliament and call for new elections.

13. (C) The Ambassador requested Samaraweera's assessment about how the major parties would fare if elections were to be held this fall. Samaraweera, who was responsible for persuading the JVP to support the government when President Rajapaksa took office, responded that the JVP's support was thinner than most gave them credit for. He predicted the JVP would lose at least half, but probably more, of the 37 seats they now hold. Similarly, the Buddhist Monk JHU party would probably lose all nine of the seats it now holds. He estimated that the UNP would probably pick up most of the seats lost by the JVP since many of these seats had been previously held by the UNP. The SLFP would pick up all of the JHU seats and some of the JVP seats. Given those calculations, he admitted that the JVP probably would not vote against the budget, but still faced a difficult decision because of growing dissatisfaction in the South with the government over the cost of living and corruption.

14. (C) The Ambassador asked what role if any former President Chandrika Kumaratunga might play. Samaraweera, who meets frequently and is friendly with Kumaratunga, stated that she is not seeking to run for office, but that she might be willing to assume leadership of the SLFP party, similar to the role Sonia Gandhi now plays in leading the Congress Party in India. Samaraweera said Chandrika still has significant support in many parts of the country so a decision by her to work with him would pose a significant threat to the Rajapaksa brothers. He commented that the Rajapaksas are well aware of this and are "obsessed" with her activities.

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15. (C) Ambassador reviewed the advice the U.S. has provided to the government about the opportunities and risks in stabilizing and developing the East (reftels). Samaraweera responded that he had heard and read the Ambassador's public remarks on this and agreed "one hundred percent" with them. He said that disarming the Karuna group would be a particularly important priority, without which reconstruction and new elections could not proceed in good order.

Arbour Visit

16. (C) Samaraweera said that he planned to meet Louise Arbour during her visit to Colombo next week. He said he would recommend to her that she pursue the idea of an expanded presence by the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights. He predicted the government would resist such a proposal, but noted that the failure of Sri Lankan institutions to address their own human rights issues meant that this was the only realistic way forward to stop human rights abuses.

Comment

17. (C) Samaraweera retains significant influence both because of the support he enjoys in the south, the principled stand he has taken on issues such as human rights and the need for a negotiated settlement, and the good relations he has maintained with the JVP, Chandrika and others. The position of the JVP will be critical on the budget vote. If most of its MP's vote with the government, the numbers become very difficult for Samaraweera and Wickremesinghe's National Congress. Apparently realizing this, they are now playing down the possibility of toppling the government in November. We continue to believe that it will be difficult for the UNP and SLFP/M to muster sufficient votes to bring down the government during the November budget votes.

BLAKE